

# **Role of Traditional Leadership Structures in Enhancing Inter-Ethnic Conflict Resolution in Laisamis Sub-County, Marsabit County, Kenya**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Africa experiences significant levels of inter-ethnic conflict. These conflicts have caused loss of life and property, human displacement, cattle rustling and slow socio-economic growth. This study sought to investigate how cultural factors enhance inter-ethnic conflict resolution in Laisamis Sub-county, Marsabit County in Kenya. Specifically, the study sought to; to establish the extent to which traditional leadership structures enhance inter-ethnic conflict resolution in Laisamis Sub-county, Marsabit County, Kenya. The study used mixed research design. The target population constituted 292 leaders of Laisamis Sub-county. A sample of 123 respondents was selected using both purposive and simple random sampling methods. The study used a questionnaire, key informant interview schedule and focus group discussions guide to collect data. Response from key informant interviews and focus group discussions were organized into themes and analyzed qualitatively. The findings were presented using frequencies and percentages. The results indicated that cultural factors do indeed enhance inter-ethnic conflict resolution in the study area. Majority of the respondents indicated that traditional leadership, have an influence on inter-ethnic conflict resolution in Laisamis Sub-county of Marsabit County. The study concluded that most of the conflicts in Laisamis could be resolved through effective traditional leadership also plays a role in enhancing conflict resolution in the area. This study is expected to add value to the existing theories on conflict resolution and to existing knowledge in the field of inter-ethnic conflict resolution. Besides, it is expected to provide information to different organs of the government and stakeholders with interest on the inter-ethnic conflict resolution.

**KEY WORDS:** Conflict, Traditional Leadership Structures, Inter-Ethnic Conflict, and Resolution

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Conflicts are part of any human society. According to Shoup (2008), the most common conflicts that occur in various parts of the world are the cases of inter-state and intra-state conflicts. Research indicates that while inter-state conflicts have reduced since the end of the Cold War, intra-state conflicts have been increasing in various parts of the globe and have taken an ethnic dimension. The world has witnessed a considerable rise of conflicts in many states and a notable type of conflict that has widely spread is one caused between groups of ethnic communities. Inter-ethnic conflicts therefore, have begun to receive attention globally, regionally, nationally and locally (Shoup, 2008).

At the global arena, these conflicts may be due to internal and external factors. Druanna (2015), in his thesis cited factors such as name dispute and self-identity between Greece and Macedonia as being among the causes of ethnic conflict, and the external military intervention from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) increased the conflict, instead of curbing it due to failure to understand the issues at local level. This demonstrates the need to address conflicts by developing local mechanisms that are suitable and appropriate.

Africa has a high level of violent conflicts not just in situations where law and order have broken down entirely, but also where conditions are said to be relatively stable (Murithi, 2006). According to Suliman (1996), there is no single cause of conflict nor is there often any single precondition for sustainable peace. The vast

majority of groups engaged in contemporary armed conflicts define themselves based on their identity, whether of a national, ethnic or cultural character (Mulu, 2008). This sharpens ethnic identity and chauvinism promoting the doctrine that those specific regions of a country 'belong' to the groups who originally occupied them in what is termed as autochthonous claims. This is further complicated by perceived inequalities among cultural groups in economic well-being, access to power as for instance seen between Turkana and the Pokot of Kenya. The difference in ethnic groups in the society, inequalities and competition for resources and political positions has led to inter-ethnic conflicts. In Marsabit County and Laisamis Sub-county in particular, several conflict resolution mechanisms such as combat operation, mediation, litigation, negotiation and arbitration have not been effective though they have been used before.

In Kenya, conflicts among communities have been witnessed. For instance, the Turkana and Pokot have had sporadic conflicts. Their conflicts arise due to scarcity and competition over pasture and water as well as border and boundary disputes. These disputes are compounded by minimum routine interaction and communication between the two communities (Adano, et al., 2012). A predominantly agricultural potential land combined with consolidation, adjudication and registration of land defined territorial concepts of ethnic living space within the country and county. These have combined in various degrees to make land in Kenya a volatile political issue as evidenced by the clashes in the Rift Valley in 1992, 1997 and 2007 (Mworia & Ndiku, 2012). The pastoral communities in Kenya clash over traditional grazing lands. The conflict is made worse by harsh climatic conditions, recurrent droughts and marginalization of pastoral communities from main stream development.

One region in Kenya that is prone to violent inter-ethnic conflicts is Northern Kenya, which is an area covered by the counties of Marsabit, Samburu, Isiolo, Turkana, Mandera and Wajir (Mwaniki, 2014). The area is largely remote, arid and semi-arid with isolated cases of high-altitude regions. Majority of the residents are pastoralists making it prone to conflicts caused by competition over scarce pasture and water and the infamous cattle rustling which is severe and violent. This study aims at highlighting possible solution to this state of affairs by investigating how cultural factors and attributes could be useful in solving inter-ethnic conflicts.

Marsabit County is a multi-ethnic County with about fourteen (14) of the forty-three Kenyan tribes having their heritage there and are indigenous to this County. Inter-ethnic conflicts have affected Laisamis Sub-county largely but there are limited studies that have sought to assess the causes and effects of these conflicts and how they can be resolved (Mwaniki, 2014).

### **Traditional Leadership and Inter-Ethnic Conflict Resolution**

Traditional conflict resolution processes are part of a well-structured, time-proven social system geared towards reconciliation, maintenance and improvement of social relationships. The methods, processes and regulations are deeply rooted in the customs and traditions of peoples of Africa. The importance and utility of the processes lie in the fact that they strive "to restore a balance, to settle conflict and eliminate disputes" (Bar-Tal, 2013). Traditional processes are relatively informal and thus, less intimidating. Those who use them are also more at ease in a familiar environment. The role of chiefs, elders, family heads, and others is to not only resolve conflicts but also anticipate stopping or intercepting conflicts. Group relationships and rights anticipate also stopping or intercepting conflicts and are as important as individual ones as the emphasis is on restoring relationships and reconciling groups (Makwudo and Obj, 2020).

According to Kenya Human Rights Commission, report (2011) traditional leaders play an active role in the traditional conflict resolution in Africa. In rural set-ups, traditional leaders have responsibility in decision making and resolving minor conflicts. A study on the role of traditional leadership in Zimbabwe cited three main reasons as to why modern African states prefer traditional and informal justice. One is that, formal state justice is limited in the rural areas, secondly the formal justice offered by the state may not be suitable on conflict resolution in the rural areas and thirdly, the formal state system may have limited structure in most countries and therefore enough resources are not allocated to cater for the smaller criminal cases in the rural areas

Tinashe (2018) established that traditional leaders play a pivotal role in settling community disputes across rural Zimbabwe. These leaders are regarded as custodians of traditional law and receive the bulk of the cases dealing with violence, which might be political, domestic or antisocial behavior. It is only when there are bigger cases that elders seek help and forward the cases to state authorities. Yet it appears that they lack the power and knowledge to prevent and adequately respond to violence. The guiding objective of the traditional justice system presided over by traditional leaders in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular, is to restore peace and harmony within the community. This is done by ensuring that disputants and their respective supporters are reconciled. It has been observed that at the heart of the traditional African adjudication system lays the notion of reconciliation or the restoration of harmony.

According to Melil (2018) there are three key factors, which help explain why most Africans in general continue to look to traditional and informal justice forums to resolve disputes. First, is that the vast majority of

Africans continue to live in rural villages where access to the formal state justice is extremely limited. Secondly, is the type of justice offered by the formal courts may be inappropriate for the resolution of disputes between people living in rural communities or even those in urban areas and can cause conflict within the community and affect economic co-operation on which the community depends. Third, the state justice systems in most African countries operate with an extremely limited infrastructure, which does not have the resources to deal with minor disputes in the villages.

According to Kenya Human Rights Commission (2011) traditional authorities play a pre-eminent role as mediators of violent conflict. The penalties, instituted usually focus on compensation or restitution in order to restore the status quo, rather than punishment. It was further noted that, in pre-colonial Africa, the traditional leaders' forum in a number of societies assumed a more adjudicatory role for the most serious crimes such as murder and witchcraft, where in such cases capital punishment would be considered. Otherwise, their role as chiefs has been to bring disputing parties together and to create an atmosphere in which they can resolve their differences. Thus, the traditional leaders act as facilitators in conflict resolution. The gap exists in literature on how traditional leadership can be used in inter-ethnic conflict resolution and hence, the study seeks to investigate how traditional leadership enhances inter-ethnic conflict resolution in Laisamis Sub-county, Marsabit County.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Globally, conflicts among pastoral communities have continued to exist, thereby causing tension in their localities. Conflicts among the pastoral communities are largely caused by historical rivalry, land issues, political incitements, idleness amongst the youth and deep-seated cultural values (Huho, 2012). Over the years, perennial drought in northern Kenya has triggered inter-ethnic attacks, inter-clan attacks and counter-attacks and lives have been lost (Bradley, 2017). Although there are community interventions used to resolve conflict among the inflicted ethnic groups, many of these interventions have failed while others have not been sustainable. There is no attempt that has been made to determine if cultural attributes such as rite of passage, traditional leadership structures, the role-played by gender, and nomadic lifestyle can play a part in conflict resolution among the warring parties. Despite various measures put forward by the National Government, Marsabit County Government and Non-governmental Organizations to enhance sustainable inter-ethnic conflict resolution, peace has still proven elusive. The pastoral community at Laisamis has repeatedly been affected by conflicts that emanates from competition for pasture. It is against this background that this study seeks to establish the role that traditional leadership structure can play in enhancing inter-ethnic conflict resolution among warring communities in Laisamis Sub-county of Marsabit County in Kenya.

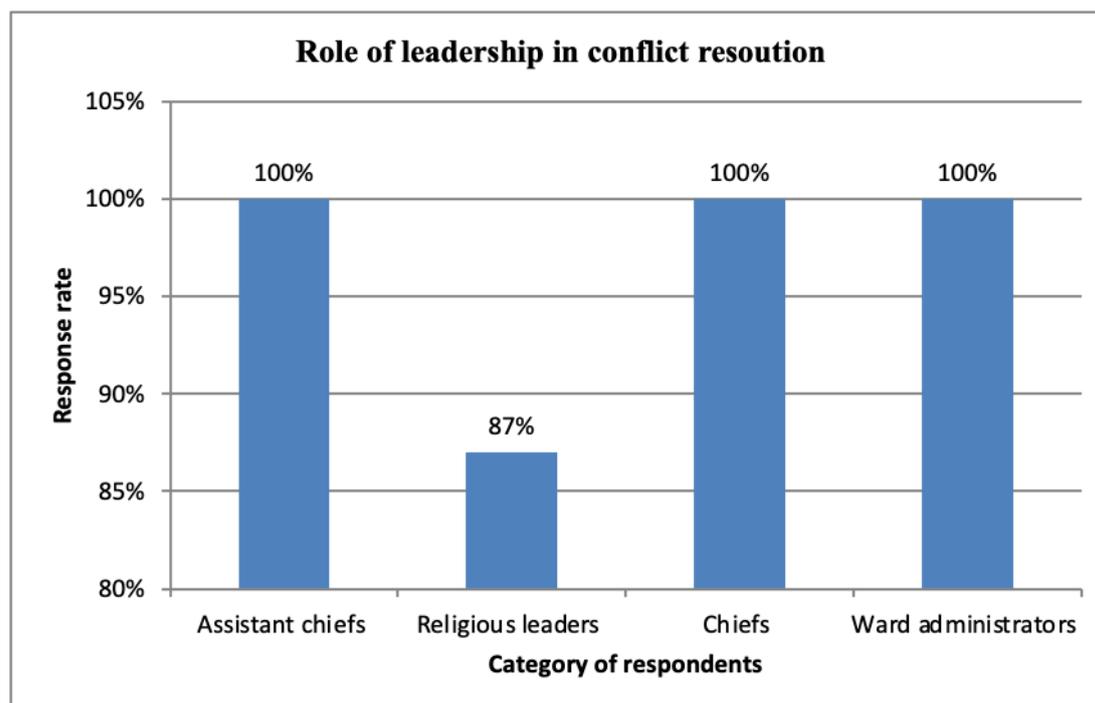
### **Research methodology**

The study used mixed research design. The target population constituted 292 leaders of Laisamis Sub-county. A sample of 123 respondents was selected using both purposive and simple random sampling methods. The study used a questionnaire, key informant interview schedule and focus group discussions guide to collect data. Response from key informant interviews and focus group discussions were organized into themes and analyzed qualitatively.

### **Data presentation**

The objective of the study sought to establish the influence of leadership structures in conflict among ethnic communities in Laisamis Sub-county. It is important to note that leadership in the pastoral communities is considered a reserve for the men and the young men are introduced to the community leadership through their age-sets which done in a rite of passage. This means that the leadership structure in Laisamis Sub-county is built based on the age sets and it is depended on the ability of the young men being able to protect their community and engage in successful raids that are able to bring more animals into the community.

The respondents were asked to respond to various statements that sought to establish the role that leadership structures play in enhancing inter-ethnic conflict resolution in the communities in Laisamis Sub-county. On whether the traditional leaders are able recognise and respond to the conflict among the ethnic groups the responses were presented as shown in figure 1.



**Figure 1: Role of Leadership Structures in Enhancing Conflict Resolution**

Source: Research, 2019

The results shows that majority of the respondents agreed that the traditional leaders have the capacity to recognise the conflicts way before they erupt. This is because when the young men go and raid a community, the elders give them their full support while the women are there ready to bless the young men and praise them for a successful raid. This implies that the leaders in the community are usually aware of the happenings and they even know when the raids that bring about conflicts occur. This shows that if the leadership in Laisamis Sub-county among the various communities are willing, they can end the conflicts because they have the powers.

It was also noted that since the community leadership is involved in making all the decision of the community then they have the role of making the right decision that will ensure that the ethnic conflicts are brought to an end. Through effective decision, making the community leaders can take the responsibility of ensuring that all decisions involving the community is done with the aim of protecting life and respecting their neighbours. Decision leading to any act of conflicts such as organized raids and any form of revenge is re-evaluated to ensure that the conflicts do not occur.

In this picture, the women leaders drawn from different villages and different ethnic groups were invited and they participated and responded very well in trying to unearth some of the many leadership issues that could be the root cause of inter-ethnic conflicts. Most participants did agree that tradition leaders could never be put out of the equation in solving the ethnic conflict. It was notable that the traditional leaders hold the peace for the communities living in the pastoral set up such as in Laisamis Sub-county.

**Experts Discussion with a Group of Women of Women Leaders from Different Villages**

One of the women indicted that;

“... these leaders are responsible for all important decision that affects the communities, whether it is land, rite of passage, marriage and resources. I may add that, they actually hold the future of our communities and therefore if they can decide today that there are no more raids and conflicts among the communities, that will be the case.”

Another woman leader also indicated that;

“It is a high time that our traditional leadership beliefs are changed since the world has become modern and we also need to move forward with it. The leaders must be in the forefront to lead the communities out of the cultural believes and practices that are making us lag behind in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Further, the liberty of our communities lies strictly in our hands as the leaders. We need to embrace education as one of the means of liberating our communities.” Source: Research, 2019

The results indicate that, conflicts that are experienced in the area can be easily managed if the leadership is committed to it. This is because the respondents have shown that most of the conflicts arise from cultural

practices and the only people who can use their authority to control these cultural activities are the leaders. The results also indicated that education levels among the community members are low and this contributes to the many challenges facing the communities including inter-ethnic conflicts.

In a separate discussion with the youth leaders, held at Laisamis the study sought to get the voice of the youth regarding the issues of inter-ethnic conflicts. The researcher engaged the youth whom he met carrying their weapons, which forms part of their life. These young initiates have just come from circumcision having been released from seclusion after their rites of passage to manhood. This is the most dangerous group who go out to wage war against other ethnic groups in their constant raids. This group of young men is now part of the leadership structure of the community as they form their age-set. These young men will have to go out for raids and bring home cattle so that they can be qualified to move to the next stage in life. With this determination, they never turn back from war-like activities, which fuel inter-ethnic conflicts. In the discussion, this is what they had to say; Box 4 below;

***Excerpts from Discussion Group with Youth Leaders from Different Age Sets***

One of the group members indicated that;

“.. It is our leaders who are fueling these conflicts and hence they are the ones to stop them, because there is no raid I have participated in that did not have the blessing of the community leaders, yet when the raid turns out to be unsuccessful, they say we the young people are weak and unable to defend the community. You are denied succession to the next stage of eldership later and other privileges like decision making in the community. For sure with this pressure from the traditional leaders, the war on inter-ethnic conflict can never be won through other means but by the decision made by the community leaders...”

Another participant said:

“.... I believe these conflicts will be outdated if the leaders of the community encourage the young people to look at alternative ways of livelihood and not just the animals. The leaders have that responsibility and power. I can attest here that, those of us from the poor families are the ones who are still bound by many of these traditions under these community leaders. If I look at the progress my classmates who had the opportunity to pursue further studies have done so far, I feel ashamed and note that community leaders do not go and force them to join us during the raids”.

In support of this, another youth leader indicated that;

“.....the community leaders should now make decisions that are aimed at helping the young people change their way of livelihood and that will bring an end to the constant conflicts are experiencing. It is through their guidance that, we the youth can cease from these activities”. Source: Research, 2019

These sentiments imply that the inter-ethnic conflicts are something that the communities can decide and stop but it only requires the action by the elders. If they make the right decision and put their cultural beliefs aside, then conflict resolution process will be easy to manage. The youth leaders felt that if the leaders can give them proper direction on how to channel their energy and also device other alternative measures of a person's maturity and leadership capability apart from war then the issue of conflict will be a thing of the past. This is a clear indication of the important role played by the community leaders in the whole saga of inter-ethnic conflicts in Laisamis Sub-county.

## **II. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study was to establish the how traditional leadership structures enhance inter-ethnic conflict resolution in Laisamis Sub-county, Marsabit County, Kenya.

The study first established the demographic attributes of the respondents. The study acknowledged that majority of the leaders of the communities in Laisamis Sub-county were men a fact that is explained by the patriarchal nature of the communities living in the pastoral setups. The study used the women group leaders to ensure that the women who play a role in the conflict resolution give their views. It was noted that most respondents had basic education and very few had advanced their education past primary level. Most of the village elders in the sub-county were not literate because they rose to the occasion based on their role in the community and after attaining a certain age-set they qualified to hold that position. The opinion of the youth was also incorporated as an important aspect of the inter-ethnic conflict resolution process. Participation through focus group discussion where youth leaders from different groups were engaged in a very productive discussion, assisted in making the study a success. The study established that majority of the respondents were professing African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam in that order.

The study established that majority of the respondents were fully aware of the causes of inter-ethnic conflicts in the area. With pasture and water topping the list, land issues and enmity was also noted as very critical causes of these conflicts among the communities in Laisamis Sub-county.

Literature has indicated that leadership was very important in solving conflicts among the pastoral communities in northern Kenya. In this study, it was noted that pastoralists and other communities with scarce

natural resources often come into agreement on how to effectively share those resources during the dry seasons. It was noted that, usually before the communities started moving their cattle in search of pasture, the elders from both communities negotiate on how the movement should take place and a general agreement on how to access water and pasture is reached. These negotiations have been of great help in preventing clashes between the members of the various communities living in Laisamis Sub-county. However, their success has depended fully on the leadership of the communities, which play the central role in the resolution process.

It was established that the leadership structure here is not the administrative leadership of the chief, assistant chiefs, village elders, parliamentarians and other administrators but it also involves the young people defined in leadership through their age set. The age set makes a very critical part of the community leadership structure and it has to always be involved in the negotiations because they are the ones who go to fight in order to fulfil their ego and to prove their strength and power among the people of the various communities in Laisamis Sub-county.

### III. RECOMMENDATION

Stakeholders in inter-ethnic conflict resolution should consider other strategies that can be used to strengthen the leadership structures so that the leadership can be in the forefront of accepting alternative methods of solving their disputes other than the use of current methods of retaliation and attacks in Laisamis Sub-county.

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